Rasplica, W. L., McGuire, M. V., Ruby, S. F., King, S., & Bellamy, G. T. From the middle out: Building MTSS Leadership capability through job-embedded administrator development. *Journal of Multitiered System of Supports, 1*(1), 50-65.

PRACTICE ARTICLE

Journal of Multitiered System of Supports

From the Middle Out: Building MTSS Leadership Capability Through Job-Embedded Administrator Development

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ABSTRACT

Despite a well-established research base linking local administrative leadership to the success of school improvement initiatives, preparation programs rarely equip administrators with the specialized knowledge required to lead multitiered system of supports (MTSS) effectively. This article describes the design, theoretical framework, and 5-year outcomes of the Washington Administrators Improving Multitiered System of Supports (AIMS) Project, a federally-funded professional development program built explicitly around this skills-to-capability challenge, serving certificated school administrators across Washington State (2021–2025, n = 82). Using a cohort-based model anchored in implementation science and leadership development research, AIMS engaged participants in monthly seminars organized around nine MTSS competency clusters, year-long Developmental Leadership Projects (DLPs), and structured collegial support. Pre- and post-self-assessment data collected from all five cohorts consistently demonstrated meaningful gains in participants' confidence to lead MTSS at both school and district levels across all nine competency areas. Qualitative responses highlighted growth in MTSS knowledge, cross-district networking, and readiness to lead systemic change. Findings support the efficacy of sustained, job-embedded, competency-based professional learning as a mechanism for developing local MTSS leadership capability and have implications for the design of in-service professional development and pre-service administrator preparation programs.

Keywords: multitiered system of supports (MTSS), administrative leadership, professional development, special education, implementation science practice, leadership capacity

A quarter century of research has established that building and district administrators are among the most powerful influences on whether school improvement initiatives succeed or fail (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009). This finding holds with particular force for special education and inclusive services: local administrative leaders significantly shape whether state initiatives result in actual changes to classroom practice (Billingsley et al., 2017), whether those changes achieve their intended outcomes (Klute et al., 2016), and whether gains are sustained over time (McIntosh et al., 2016). Yet despite this well-documented importance, the field has largely failed to equip these leaders with the specialized knowledge they need (Bartholomew & De Jong, 2017; Billingsley et al., 2017; Casale et al., 2024; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Sailor et al., 2021). National standards for the accreditation of educational leadership preparation programs - as reflected in the guidelines of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2018) - include minimal explicit attention to the organizational systems and leadership competencies required to lead complex, multitiered system of supports (MTSS) improvement efforts. The preparation gap is consequential because without skilled local leaders, even the most carefully designed state and federal initiatives stall at the schoolhouse door.

A growing body of organizational research clarifies precisely where this leadership challenge is most consequential: in the middle of the district hierarchy, not at its apex (Burch & Spillane, 2004). Ottino and Mau (2022) assert that problems are defined by uncertainty and complexity, and they require leaders who can solve problems and construct systems across domains. Nexus leaders, according to Ottino and Mau (2022), see the organization as a complex adaptive system with staff that understands that they are integral parts of it, not isolated cogs, and they build diverse teams that balance divergent thinkers (for creativity) with convergent thinkers (for implementation).

Spillane et al. (2002) demonstrated that school leaders' sensemaking of district policy is situated in their professional training, personal histories, and roles as intermediaries between the central office and classroom teachers, meaning that what a reform "comes to mean for implementing agents depends to a great extent on their repertoire of existing knowledge and experience" (p. 738). Thus, the translation of state policy into local practice is not a mechanical process of information transfer but an interpretive one, shaped by the knowledge, values, and organizational position of the administrators who stand between policy intent and classroom reality. Honig (2006) elaborated this dynamic through the concept of boundary spanning, showing that district central-office administrators positioned to operate across the central office, schools, and community agencies can serve as powerful levers of implementation, when they are adequately supported and positioned to do so. Conversely, Bjørk and Blase (2009), in a longitudinal 10-year case study, found that middle managers' political acquiescence or resistance to district-wide reform initiatives can determine whether a superintendent's change agenda succeeds or fails, regardless of any formal mandate. The inescapable conclusion is that district reform efforts succeed or fail largely at the middle management (nexus) layer, not in the boardroom or the classroom.

Within this middle management layer, the district special education administrator occupies a position of distinctive leverage for MTSS implementation because special education administrators sit at the intersection of federal compliance requirements, instructional leadership responsibilities, and cross-role collaboration demands that are uniquely challenging. The available literature on the special education director and supervisor role, much of it qualitative and small in scale, points to several features that amplify the general middle manager dynamic.

Cross-systems Access

Writing from a practitioner perspective, Sonenblum (2003) argued that it is critical for the administrators of special education to be perceived as school administrators who shoulder their share of the work of running the organization in addition to responding to the specific needs of students, staff, and parents. A director's presence in district management meetings "may serve as a visual reminder that the implications of any action taken must be analyzed in terms of their impact on education of all students, including those with disabilities" (Sonenblum, 2003, p. 1). This dual legitimacy, as a general education partner and as a specialized compliance officer, is unusual among district administrators.

Catalyzing District-wide Change Through MTSS

Sonenblum (2003) described the special education director's role as that of a "catalyst for productive change," responsible for modeling inclusive principles among peers and acknowledging the challenges faced by building principals and curriculum directors. In the context of MTSS, this means the special education director is often the person who can broker across the general/special education divide, a divide that stalls implementation in most districts. Qualitative evidence is consistent with this description, with one caveat. In focus groups with 17 special education directors in one Midwestern state, most participants envisioned their role in response to intervention at the secondary level as leading and managing change and saw a need for closer collaboration with other district-level administrators, particularly curriculum directors (Sansosti et al., 2011). However, participants' concerns about legal requirements, state guidance, and how to merge general and special education hinted that directors may have perceived their own role in such a model as ancillary. This brokering role is most powerful when the middle manager's expertise is deployed collaboratively rather than held in reserve for compliance functions (Honig, 2006).

Teacher Retention as a System Lever

The special education administrator's influence on special education teacher retention has downstream effects on implementation capacity. Chronic special education teacher shortages destabilize the very instructional infrastructure that MTSS depends on at Tiers 2 and 3. The director is uniquely positioned to address working conditions, caseloads, and professional development that affect retention, which in turn affects whether tiered support reaches students. In a qualitative study of one high-performing, inclusive district, local special education administrators described cultivating a district-wide community of effective special education teachers as part of their role (Bettini et al., 2017). As implementation science research confirms, sustained change requires sustained capacity; high turnover at the frontline of MTSS delivery resets implementation progress (Fixsen et al., 2019).

Knowledge Base Advantage

When it comes to data-based decision-making, progress monitoring, and individualized intensive intervention, the core technical competencies of MTSS, the special education administrator typically holds the deepest reservoir of relevant expertise in the district (Frigmanski, 2014). The special education director is often the only central-office administrator who has personally implemented IEP-level progress monitoring, led problem-solving team processes, and navigated the relationship between Tier 3 intervention data and eligibility determination. This expertise positions the director as a natural leader for MTSS's most technically demanding components, but only if that expertise is recognized and leveraged rather than siloed in the compliance lane.

The inescapable conclusion is that special education administrators are not peripheral to district MTSS leadership; they are, when properly positioned and supported, among its most indispensable architects. The Washington AIMS Project was designed with this distinctive leadership role explicitly in view, targeting special education administrators and supervisors alongside building-level administrators, and teaching and learning administrators as essential co-architects of district MTSS capacity and inclusionary practices across all three tiers. Individual schools in a school district will not be able to sustain innovation without the direct support of district level administration.

The inability of school personnel to sustain innovation is particularly acute in Washington State, where the gap between state-level MTSS policy ambition and local implementation capacity has been stark. Despite legislative allowances for districts to adopt multitiered approaches to identifying specific learning disabilities (SLD), only one of the state's 294 school districts had made this transition at the time of the AIMS Project's inception. Washington ranked 44th among states in the percentage of students with disabilities spending 80% or more of

their school day in general education settings (57.7%), and student achievement data on both national and state assessments consistently revealed significant performance gaps for students with disabilities (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [OSPI], 2019). The performance gaps reflect not a failure of policy intent but a failure of local leadership capacity - the essential bridge between what a state mandates and what happens in schools and classrooms.

Understanding this leadership gap requires distinguishing between two related but distinct constructs: skills and capabilities. In educational leadership, skills are the discrete, learnable performances that leaders can be trained to execute (Murphy et al., 2017), including conducting a structured classroom observation, facilitating a data team meeting, interpreting a benchmark assessment report, or delivering corrective feedback to a teacher. Leadership preparation programs are reasonably effective at developing skills of this kind (Crow & Whiteman, 2017). Capabilities, by contrast, are the integrated, context-dependent ability to deploy those skills effectively under the actual conditions of leading a school or district, where competing priorities, political pressure, staff resistance, resource constraints, and accountability demands operate simultaneously.

Research on leadership development consistently shows that skill acquisition in training settings does not automatically transfer to in-context leadership performance (Dexter et al., 2020); challenging job responsibilities embedded in authentic organizational conditions are the primary driver of capability development (McCauley, 2008). A principal may be skilled at giving feedback in a role-play but lack the capability to deliver it to a veteran teacher in the context of a contentious labor environment. The skill is intact; the capability is not yet there. This distinction is particularly consequential in educational leadership because the gap between the two is unusually wide. The exercise of leadership capability requires not only individual competence but also relational trust, organizational legitimacy, and system-level infrastructure, conditions that no preparation program can fully replicate. Critically, a leader's capability is partly a property of the system they are leading: what a reform "comes to mean for implementing agents depends to a great extent on their repertoire of existing knowledge and experience" and the organizational position from which they act (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 738). The same administrator may be capable in one district context and constrained in another, not because their skills changed, but because the surrounding infrastructure, culture, and resources differ, a dynamic implementation science research confirms when it finds that sustained change requires sustained organizational capacity, and that turnover or instability at any level resets implementation progress (Fixsen et al., 2019). Building local leadership capacity for MTSS, therefore, requires more than skill instruction. It requires sustained, job-embedded learning structures that develop the capability to lead complex systems change in real organizational contexts, precisely the leadership challenge the AIMS Project was built to address.

MTSS and the Leadership Gap

A multitiered system of supports (MTSS) represents the primary framework through which school districts have sought to close these gaps. MTSS organizes evidence-based instruction and intervention in tiers of increasing intensity, aligns universal screening and progress monitoring data to guide instructional decision-making, and requires coordinated collaboration across general and special education personnel. The promise of the framework has been well established in the research literature (Choi et al., 2020; Fuchs et al., 2012; Horner et al., 2010). Yet the translation of this evidence base into sustainable local practice remains uneven across the United States, and a growing body of scholarship identifies administrative leadership as the critical mediating variable between MTSS policy and MTSS practice (Arden et al., 2017; Klute et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2016). Building the local leadership capacity to lead MTSS implementation - not simply disseminating information about it - is therefore the essential, and largely unmet, challenge for the field.

Theoretical Framework

Using MTSS to address the leadership gap relies on two intersecting bodies of theory and research. Both the broader organizational literature on leadership development and the education-specific literature on effective professional learning are needed for effective MTSS leadership.

Leadership development research. Research across sectors consistently identifies challenging job responsibilities, rather than formal coursework or training alone, as the most influential context for leadership growth (Brauckmann et al., 2023; McCauley, 2008; Ohlott, 2004). Developmental relationships and structured reflection on practice follow as the next most critical factors (Murphy et al. 2017). Yet researchers caution that experience alone is an unreliable teacher; conceptual knowledge plays an essential scaffolding role in helping leaders make sense of novel situations and interpret the consequences of their decisions (Taylor et al., 2009).

In the education context, Desimone (2009) identified five core features of professional development most associated with positive outcomes: content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. Temperley (2011) extended this framework, emphasizing the importance of inquiry-based cycles embedded in daily professional practice. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that effective professional learning must be sustained over time, grounded in authentic leadership challenges, supported by structured feedback and collegial community, and aligned with a coherent knowledge base.

Implementation science. MTSS itself is a framework deeply informed by implementation science, which offers empirical guidance on the conditions under which evidence-based practices are adopted, implemented with fidelity, and sustained (Fixsen et al., 2019). Implementation science recognizes that practice change is not a single event but a staged process - from exploration and installation through initial and full implementation - and that each stage requires different forms of leadership support.

Purpose

The Washington AIMS Project was designed to directly meet the challenge of leadership gaps within MTSS. AIMS was a federally funded, year-long professional development program that develops local administrative leaders, not through traditional professional development formats, but through a sustained, job-embedded, competency-based model that positions practicing administrators as active leaders of MTSS change in their own settings. The purpose of the current paper is to present the design rationale, and 5-year self-assessment outcomes of the AIMS Project across five annual cohorts (2021–2025). We also provide a detailed examination of how participants' self-assessed leadership confidence changed across nine MTSS competency areas while engaged in the program. Finally, we discuss implications for the field regarding in-service professional development design and the preparation of educational administrators for MTSS leadership roles.

Method

This study employed a pre-post, repeated-measures descriptive design across five consecutive annual cohorts. Data were collected from year-end self-reflection and assessment surveys administered to each cohort at program completion, with pre-participation baseline data gathered from parallel surveys administered before the first AIMS session of each cohort year.

Participants

Each annual cohort targeted approximately 15–22 certified school administrators who already held responsibilities related to MTSS implementation. Selection criteria emphasized both the participant's current leadership role and their district's readiness to support MTSS work. Cohorts were intentionally designed to mix

administrators across school and district levels including principals, assistant principals, special education administrators, teaching and learning administrators, and assistant superintendents in order to build cross-role relationships and shared understanding of the systemic nature of MTSS.

A total of 82 certificated school administrators participated across the five cohorts: Cohort 1 (n = 12, 2021), Cohort 2 (n = 21, 2022), Cohort 3 (n = 20, 2023), Cohort 4 (n = 14, 2024), and Cohort 5 (n = 15, 2025). Participants represented a cross-section of administrative roles and district types across Washington State.

Measures

The data for the evaluation consisted of participant surveys and faculty ratings of student development leadership projects (DLP). Each is described next.

Self-Reflection and Assessment Survey

The primary outcome measure was a researcher-developed survey asking participants to rate (a) the extent to which AIMS participation expanded their ability to lead in each competency area and (b) their confidence in their ability to lead in each competency area in their school and in their school district. Ratings were made on five-point Likert-type scales (1 = None/Not at all; 5 = A great deal). The same confidence questions were embedded in both the pre-participation and year-end surveys to enable paired comparisons. An open-ended question gathered qualitative reflections in Cohorts 2–5.

Faculty Ratings of DLP Reflections

Faculty assessed the extent to which participants' monthly DLP reflections contained evidence of competency-cluster knowledge and skills. These data were reported separately to provide a complementary perspective on the self-report findings.

Participants documented DLP progress through an Engagement Plan, monthly written reflections connecting DLP activities to program competency clusters, and a Final Report and Presentation describing goals, strategies, results, and forward-looking leadership learning. Faculty provided written feedback on each product and rated the extent to which reflections demonstrated evidence of competency-cluster knowledge. Using a revised Completion Checklist, faculty evaluated the work and performance of cohort participants at the end of years two through five. The revised Completion Checklist was created and maintained on a secure electronic platform. Faculty rated participants' "demonstrated ability" of "Leadership in MTSS" and "demonstrated ability" in each of the eight competency clusters using a four-point scale where 4 is high, or "Excellent," 3 is "Very good," 2 is "Good" and 1 is "Adequate." Cohort 5 participants' demonstrated ability of "Leadership in MTSS" was rated 3.0 on average; the average rating of Cohort 5 participants' demonstrated ability to lead effectively across all eight competency areas and across participants was 3.0. Cohort 4 participants' demonstrated ability of "Leadership in MTSS" was rated 3.1 on average; the average rating of Cohort 4 participants across all eight competency areas and across participants was 2.8. Cohort 3 participants' demonstrated ability of "Leadership in MTSS" was rated 3.2 on average; the average rating of Cohort 3 participants across all eight competency areas and across participants was 2.9. Cohort 2 participants' demonstrated ability of "Leadership in MTSS" was rated 2.6 on average, and the average rating of Cohort 2 participants across all eight competency areas and across participants was 2.6.

At the end of year one, faculty used the original version of the Completion Checklist to evaluate Cohort 1 participants' work and performance during the AIMS project. This version of the Completion Checklist also was created and maintained on a secure electronic platform. Faculty rated Cohort 1 participants' "demonstrated ability" of "Leadership in MTSS" as 3.2 on average, using a four-point scale where 4 is high, or "Very good," and 1 is low, or "Very poor." The average rating of ability to lead effectively across all eight competency areas and across participants was 3.1 on the four-point scale where 4 is high, or "Very good," and 1 is low, or "Very poor."

Washington AIMS Project

Six core program design elements that distinguish AIMS from conventional professional development models include:

- **Annual cohorts** of approximately 15–22 administrators who learn together and build a shared professional network across school and district roles, including principals, assistant principals, and special education directors.
- **Developmental Leadership Projects (DLPs)**, year-long leadership responsibilities that each participant assumes in their current setting. DLPs simultaneously advance MTSS implementation in participants' schools or districts and serve as the primary vehicle for applied learning.
- **Monthly full-day sessions** integrating academic learning (expert presentations and structured readings on each competency cluster) with collegial analysis of participants' DLP progress and leadership challenges.
- **Curated learning resources** organized by competency cluster, including materials from OSEP-funded technical assistance centers such as the National Center on Intensive Intervention, Center for Research in Technology and Innovation, the IRIS Center, and State Implementation and Scaling Up of Evidence-based Practices.
- **Ongoing online mentoring and small professional learning groups** (PLGs) facilitated by program faculty.
- **Systematic assessment and feedback** through pre- and post-self-assessments, faculty ratings of DLP reflections, and written feedback on each DLP work product.

This framework explicitly positions participants not as recipients of information but as active leadership practitioners whose ongoing work generates the material for collaborative professional inquiry.

MTSS Competency Clusters

The AIMS curriculum organized professional learning into nine competency clusters, each the focus of one monthly session. These clusters, informed by effective MTSS implementation, address:

1. School-wide multilevel academic and behavioral prevention systems
2. Developing and sustaining complex systems
3. Developing school and district teams and tools
4. Research-based core reading and math instruction
5. Universal screening and progress monitoring
6. Identifying and implementing evidence-based behavioral practices
7. Identifying and implementing evidence-based academic instructional practices
8. Data-based decision-making
9. MTSS leadership skills (integrated throughout)

Each cluster was accompanied by specific learning objectives, curated resources from OSEP-funded centers, and an invited expert consultant who brought both research expertise and practical experience in the topic area.

Developmental Leadership Projects

The DLP is the signature pedagogical feature of the AIMS model. At the outset of each cohort year, participants, together with AIMS faculty collaboratively defined a challenging, year-long leadership responsibility aligned with actual MTSS implementation needs in their setting. This joint definition process ensured that DLPs represented genuine organizational challenges, not artificial assignments. This assessment process served both formative and accountability functions.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analyses examined mean confidence ratings before and after AIMS participation for each cohort and each competency area, changes in individual participants' confidence ratings (categorized as increased, no change, or decreased), and the percentage of participants rating the program as having expanded their ability to lead (4 or 5 on the five-point scale). Qualitative responses to open-ended items were reviewed thematically to identify prominent patterns in participants' reflective narratives.

Results

Across all five cohorts, participants consistently rated AIMS as having substantially expanded their ability to lead in each of the nine competency areas. Table 1 displays mean ratings and the percentage of participants rating the program at 4 or 5 for each competency area within each cohort.

Table 1

Participant Ratings of the Extent to Which AIMS Expanded Their Ability to Lead, by Competency Area and Cohort

	Cohort 1		Cohort 2		Cohort 3		Cohort 4		Cohort 5	
Competency Area	Mean	% 4 or 5	Mean	% 4 or 5	Mean	% 4 or 5	Mean	% 4 or 5	Mean	% 4 or 5
School-wide multi-level academic & behavioral prevention systems	4.92	100%	4.43	86%	4.55	90%	4.31	92%	4.73	100%
Research-based core reading & math instruction	4.25	83%	4.00	76%	4.40	80%	4.36	100%	4.53	93%
Identifying/implementing evidence-based behavioral practices	4.83	100%	4.29	86%	4.25	80%	4.29	79%	4.73	100%
Identifying/implementing evidence-based academic practices	—	—	4.45	90%	4.50	90%	4.36	86%	4.67	100%
Universal screening & progress monitoring	4.83	100%	4.29	95%	4.65	100%	4.36	86%	4.80	100%
Data-based decision-making	4.83	92%	4.38	86%	4.35	85%	4.64	100%	4.73	100%
Developing district and school teams and tools	4.75	100%	4.43	86%	4.25	85%	4.64	93%	4.73	100%
Developing, sustaining, and integrating complex systems	4.75	100%	4.00	81%	4.25	80%	4.50	100%	4.67	100%
MTSS leadership skills	4.91	100%	4.48	90%	4.35	80%	4.64	100%	4.73	100%

Note. Ratings reflect participants' responses on a 5-point scale to the question of how much AIMS expanded their ability to lead in each competency area. Mean = mean rating. % 4 or 5 = percentage of respondents who rated each item a 4 or 5 (A great deal) on the 5-point scale. Dashes (—) indicate that the item was not administered. Cohort 1 used separate items for universal screening and progress monitoring; these were combined in subsequent cohorts. Cohort 1 did not include a separate item for evidence-based academic practices.

Across all cohorts and competency areas, the percentage of participants rating AIMS as having expanded their leadership ability at a level of 4 or 5 ranged from 76% to 100%. Cohort 5 produced the highest concentration of top-box ratings, with 100% of participants rating eight of the nine competency areas at 4 or 5. The competency area of research-based core reading and math instruction consistently produced the lowest mean ratings across cohorts, yet still ranged from 4.00 to 4.53 - well above the scale midpoint.

Changes in Confidence to Lead: Pre-Post Comparisons

A core outcome of interest was whether participants' confidence to lead MTSS - in both their school and school district contexts - increased following program completion. A summary of pre- and post-participation mean confidence rating ranges for each cohort is shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Range of Mean Pre- and Post-Participation Confidence Ratings by Cohort (5-Point Scale)

Cohort	Pre-Participation Range	Post-Participation Range	Range of Mean Gains
Cohort 1 (2021, *n* = 12)	3.17–3.92	3.67–4.73	+0.50 to +1.09
Cohort 2 (2022, *n* = 21)	2.86–3.86	3.86–4.48	+0.48 to +1.14
Cohort 3 (2023, *n* = 20)	2.68–3.74	3.70–4.45	+0.51 to +1.22
Cohort 4 (2024, *n* = 14)	2.71–3.93	4.07–4.57	+0.28 to +1.58
Cohort 5 (2025, *n* = 15)	2.60–3.67	3.73–4.40	+0.47 to +1.60

Note. Ranges show the lowest and highest cohort mean across the 18 confidence measures (9 competency areas × school and district levels), each rated on a 5-point scale (1 = None/Not at all; 5 = A great deal). Range of mean gains = smallest and largest pre-to-post change in mean rating across the 18 measures.

In every cohort, mean confidence ratings increased from pre- to post-participation for all nine competency areas at both the school and district leadership levels. Several patterns emerge. First, confidence gains were notably consistent: no cohort and no competency area showed a decline in mean confidence following program participation. Second, the largest gains were consistently found in competency areas where participants typically began with lower baseline confidence - notably, Developing and Sustaining Complex Systems and Developing School and District Teams and Tools. Third, competency areas most directly connected to traditional administrative responsibilities - such as data-based decision-making - tended to show smaller gains, reflecting higher baseline confidence at program entry.

Individual-Level Changes in Confidence

Analyses of individual participant change data complement mean score comparisons. The direction of confidence change for each cohort is shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Direction of Individual Confidence Change by Cohort: Median Percentage of Participants Showing an Increase, No Change, or Decrease Across Competency Areas

Cohort	% Increased	% No Change	% Decreased
Cohort 1 (2021, *n* = 12)	67%	29%	0%
Cohort 2 (2022, *n* = 21)	60%	38%	5%
Cohort 3 (2023, *n* = 19)	66%	32%	5%
Cohort 4 (2024, *n* = 13)	62%	31%	8%
Cohort 5 (2025, *n* = 15)	80%	20%	7%

Note. Values represent median percentages across all 18 measures (9 competency areas × school and district confidence) for each cohort. Percentages within each row sum to approximately 100%. The *n* for each cohort includes only participants with both pre- and post-participation ratings (19 of 20 in Cohort 3 and 13 of 14 in Cohort 4).

Across all cohorts and all competency areas, decreases in confidence ratings were rare. Participants who did not show gains generally rated their confidence the same before and after participation, which may reflect a ceiling effect or authentic pre-existing confidence in particular domains.

Qualitative Themes

Open-ended survey responses from Cohorts 2–5 yielded several prominent themes reflecting participants' subjective experience of program impact.

Growth in MTSS Knowledge and Readiness to Lead

Across cohorts, participants consistently described leaving the program with strengthened conceptual understanding and practical readiness to lead MTSS implementation. Representative responses illustrate the depth of this growth:

"AIMS provided rich learning and a deep context to the work of developing a functioning MTSS. Thank you so very much! (Cohort 5)"

"Really an excellent program that I completely was not prepared for how valuable the learning was going to be! (Cohort 4)"

"I feel prepared to tackle this work as a team with the expert knowledge of my colleagues. My knowledge of Tier 1 evidence-based instruction in math and reading evidenced the most growth. (Cohort 5)"

Value of Expert Presenters and Research-Based Resources

Participants across multiple cohorts specifically cited the contributions of invited expert consultants and curated resource materials:

"I really appreciate learning from experts who provided the most current research and who were honest about implementation challenges. (Cohort 5)"

"There are many times I have already referenced some learning we have had and went back to look at resources from the different sessions. (Cohort 3)"

Cross-District Networking as a Critical Program Element

The collegial dimension of the program emerged as a particularly valued feature across cohorts:

"Networking with other educators in various districts is also a crucial element of this project that has contributed to my feeling more confident to lead this work. (Cohort 5)"

Contextual Challenges to MTSS Leadership

Participants in Cohorts 2 and 3 described contextual barriers that constrained their ability to implement MTSS learning in practice, with COVID-19 representing the most prominent challenge for Cohort 2:

> *The consistent lack of staff had the largest impact on being able to lead work - if 50% of the leaders on any given day are teaching classes, subbing as principals, or working as 1:1 paras, the work simply will not move forward as quickly as we would like. (Cohort 2)*

Cohort 3 participants also raised systemic constraints, including collective bargaining environments and the relative scarcity of MTSS resources designed for secondary and district-level contexts.

Desire for More Applied, Role-Specific Practice

Several participants identified areas for program enhancement, particularly around more applied, role-specific MTSS practice:

> *I would have liked to have modeled an MTSS Tier 2 Team. I think an activity that I would have liked to participate in is taking data sets and role playing a team reviewing the data and then discussing intervention strategies that could be considered. (Cohort 3)*

Discussion

The 5-year outcomes of the AIMS Project offer sustained evidence that a well-designed, theoretically grounded, job-embedded professional development program can meaningfully increase practicing administrators' confidence to lead MTSS implementation at both school and district levels. The consistency of gains across five diverse cohorts spanning a global pandemic, various district contexts, and a range of prior leadership experience strengthens confidence in the program's design theory and its capacity to produce outcomes that are not cohort-specific.

These findings align with the broader professional development research literature. The AIMS model embodies the core features Desimone (2009) identified as characteristic of effective professional learning: sustained duration (a full academic year), active learning through DLPs, coherence through the competency clusters, and collective participation through cohort-based learning. The DLP as the signature applied learning vehicle reflects the central insight from organizational leadership research that challenging job responsibilities drive leadership development more powerfully than didactic instruction alone (McCauley, 2008; Murphy et al., 2017).

With an implementation science practice perspective, AIMS positioned participants to understand and address the organizational and leadership conditions that determine whether evidence-based practices take root and sustain. AIMS intentionally organized program content explicitly around MTSS as a systems-change challenge not merely as a collection of instructional practices. The competency cluster on Developing and Sustaining Complex Systems, despite often reflecting lower baseline confidence, produced some of the largest confidence gains across cohorts, suggesting that this knowledge base represented genuine new learning for most participants.

Implications for Administrator Preparation and Professional Development

The findings carry implications across the continuum of administrator preparation and development. For pre-service preparation, the consistent pattern of moderate-to-high baseline confidence in areas such as data-based decision-making coupled with lower baseline confidence in systems development and research-based literacy instruction suggests that even experienced administrators may have conceptual gaps in MTSS that were not addressed during initial preparation. University-based administrator preparation programs, particularly those granting special education administrator certification, should examine whether MTSS leadership is addressed with sufficient depth, specificity, and applied opportunity.

For in-service professional development, the AIMS model offers a replicable design framework. The elements most frequently identified as valuable by participants expert consultation grounded in current research, cross-district collegial networks, job-embedded application, and accessible ongoing resources are design features that can be adapted across geographic and resource contexts.

The qualitative data also underscore the importance of structural enablers beyond professional development itself. Participants in multiple cohorts noted that their capacity to lead MTSS was constrained by system-level factors staff shortages, competing administrative demands, collective bargaining agreements, and limited district-level alignment. Professional development alone, however well designed, cannot substitute for the policy, resource, and organizational conditions that make sustained MTSS implementation possible.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the primary outcome measure is participant self-report, which is subject to social desirability bias and may not accurately reflect actual changes in leadership behavior or student outcomes. Project staff created the surveys, and we did not examine survey reliability. Future research should examine the relationship between administrator professional development participation, MTSS fidelity indicators, and student achievement and identification outcomes.

Second, our participants included general and special education district and building leaders. We did not disaggregate their data. Additionally, the absence of a comparison group limits causal inference. The consistent pattern of pre-post gains across five cohorts is encouraging, but without a matched comparison of administrators who did not participate in AIMS, it impossible to rule out alternative explanations including maturation, regression to the mean, or selection effects. Future studies might employ a waitlist control design or a matched comparison approach.

Third, participants were self-selected and therefore likely represent administrators with above-average motivation and baseline interest in MTSS, which may limit generalizability. Fourth, longitudinal follow-up with AIMS graduates examining sustained changes in MTSS leadership practice and the durability of cross-district network relationships would substantially advance understanding of the program's long-term effects.

Conclusion

The Washington AIMS Project demonstrates that carefully designed, sustained, job-embedded professional development can meaningfully expand administrators' confidence and capability to lead MTSS implementation across a range of school and district contexts. Across five cohorts and 82 participants, pre-post self-assessment data consistently showed gains in confidence to lead in all nine MTSS competency areas at both school and district leadership levels. These gains were accompanied by qualitative evidence of substantive professional learning, expanded cross-district networks, and emerging readiness for systemic leadership.

Given the persistent gap between the evidence base for MTSS and its consistent, high-fidelity implementation in schools, building the local administrative leadership capacity to bridge this gap is not a peripheral concern it is a central challenge for the field. Programs like AIMS offer a theoretically coherent, empirically supported, and practically replicable approach to meeting this challenge. The work of translating state-level MTSS policy into

effective local programs ultimately depends on the knowledge, skills, and sustained effort of the administrators who lead our districts every day. Supporting the development of those leaders must be a priority for states, universities, and professional organizations alike.

Author Note

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

This research was supported by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Education.

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